

This summer I have been preaching through a sermon series that I have entitled Masterclass: Storyteller, in which I am looking at the parables of Jesus, the stories that He told, and what we can learn from them about what it means to know and follow God. This Sunday will be the final Sunday in the series. If you're unfamiliar with the term parable, the best definition I have found comes from Pastor John MacArthur: **A parable is an ingeniously simple word picture illuminating a profound spiritual lesson.** Jesus often taught in parables, using word pictures like "God's kingdom is like a treasure hidden in a field" or "God is like a Father welcoming home a wayward Son." By using everyday language that was familiar to his audience, he ensured that the stories would stay with them long after he left. But he also used parables because the way they were told would cause the self-righteous and sophisticated to reject his teaching as basic, completely missing the deeper spiritual truth hidden in the story, while those with childlike faith would respond to Jesus and want to know Him better.

This morning, we will be looking at the parable of the sheep and the goats from Matthew 25:31-46. This parable is the third of three parables that Jesus tells in Matthew 25 about his second coming, the reality that one day he will return to judge the earth and to put a final end to evil. He begins with the parable of the ten virgins, which warns us to be ready for his coming. Next is the parable of the talents, which tells us that we will be judged based on what we have done with what we has given us; and then, the parable of the sheep and the goats, which we will look at today. Let's begin in Matthew 25:31

Matthew 25:31–46 - *“When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his glorious throne. ³² All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. ³³ He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left. ³⁴ “Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the **creation of the world.** ³⁵ For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, ³⁶ I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.’ ³⁷ “Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? ³⁸ When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and **clothe you?** ³⁹ When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?’ ⁴⁰ “The King will reply, ‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.’ ⁴¹ “Then he will say to those on his left, ‘Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire*

*prepared for the devil and his angels. ⁴² For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, ⁴³ I was a stranger and you did not **invite me in**, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me.’ ⁴⁴ “They also will answer, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?’ ⁴⁵ “He will reply, ‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.’ ⁴⁶ “Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life.”*

I can't help feeling like this parable is a work of genius when I read it. I also can't help feeling like it's the ultimate episode of that show Undercover Boss.

I want to highlight two things from this passage this morning:

1) **One day you will stand before Jesus to be judged**

We went over a lot of this ground last week, so let me do a quick summary on what the Bible says about our final judgment. First of all, the Bible is clear that in the end, we will be judged on how we lived our life:

***2 Corinthians 5:10** - For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each of us may receive what is due us for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad.*

Secondly, the Bible is clear that salvation is by grace, and not by our good works.

***Ephesians 2:8-10** - For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith-- and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God-- ⁹ not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.*

No one will be right with God on the basis of their works or how well they did at obeying God's law. Rather, the law shows us our need for a Savior. And the only way to be right with God is by trusting in Jesus who died for your sins. It is by grace you have been saved, through faith in Jesus – a free gift from God to those who would receive it by turning from sin and self-centeredness to trust in Jesus. But look again at Ephesians 2:8-10. **Yes, you have saved by grace, through faith, but you have also been saved FOR good works. And those good works are the evidence of your faith.** Think of **James 2:14-17** - *What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him?*

¹⁵ Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. ¹⁶ If one of you says to them, "Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed," but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it? ¹⁷ In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.

Yes, praying the prayer of salvation may be the moment that you were saved, but assurance of salvation comes from watching your life to see if the Holy Spirit has indeed changed you and caused you to bear spiritual fruit and love as Jesus does.

Can someone tell by looking at your life that you believe?

And so, while the Bible is clear that it is grace that saves us, it is also clear that there will be a judgment based on our works. Works alone will never save you, but faith that does not result in good works is not really faith. **Genuine saving faith will result in good deeds.** We have been saved for good deeds - *For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.* And we will be judged by God on our good deeds, on what we have done with the gifts and talents, time and energy, money and possessions that He has entrusted to us.

One day we will be judged. The only way you will be saved is by trusting in Jesus' death for your sins. But make no mistake: you will be judged based on what you have done with your life. Remember what Paul said:

1 Corinthians 3:10-15 - *By the grace God has given me, I laid a foundation as a wise builder, and someone else is building on it. But each one should build with care. ¹¹ For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ. ¹² If anyone builds on this foundation using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw, ¹³ their work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each person's work. ¹⁴ If what has been built survives, the builder will receive a reward. ¹⁵ If it is burned up, the builder will suffer loss but yet will be saved – even though only as one escaping through the flames.*

There will be a judgment. And excuses will not work before God. The fire of God's judgment will bring to light the quality of your works here on this earth. Some of you may be saved, but only as one escaping through the flames, because you wasted your resources on things that did not build up God's kingdom, but are eternally insignificant.

So back to the parable:

Matthew 25:31-32 - *“When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his glorious throne. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats.*

Who is the Son of Man? **The Son of Man** is an image from **Daniel 7:13-14**, and is one of Jesus’ favorite ways of referring to himself:

Daniel 7:13-14 – *“In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. ¹⁴ He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all nations and people of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed.”*

Daniel 7:13-14 introduces this character known as the Son of Man, who will have all authority, glory, and power to judge the nations. He will be worshiped and his dominion will never pass away. Sometimes people think “Son of Man” is a reference to Jesus’ humanity, but on the contrary this passage is all about his **divinity** – he is worthy of all worship, he is everlasting, and specifically that he has been given all authority and power to judge the world. Check out two other verses related to this:

John 5:26-27 - *For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son to have life in himself. ²⁷ And he has given him authority to judge because he is the Son of Man.*

2 Thessalonians 1:7-10 - *This will happen when the Lord Jesus is **revealed** from heaven in blazing fire with his powerful angels. ⁸ He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. ⁹ They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might ¹⁰ on the day he comes to be glorified in his holy people and to be marveled at among all those who have believed.*

He is the Son of Man, and part of the meaning of that title is that **He is the judge of all the earth**. He will be the one judging your life when you die. And according to 2 Thessalonians, Matthew 25, and the rest of the Bible, the final judgment is not going to be good news for everyone. Some will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of God.

Not everything is judged in our time and space. Some bad deeds go unpunished, and some good deeds go unrewarded during our lives. But one day Jesus will return to set things right. Everything will be revealed one day. And some will experience eternal reward and some eternal punishment. Are you ready to stand before the Lord? Live your life with the final judgment in mind.

2) **Genuine faith in God will result in love shown to the least of these**

This parable is so genius. It's a simple story illustrating a profound point – the God of the universe, the eternal, all-powerful creator, identifies with the poor, the hungry, the prisoner, the sick, the stranger. You see, it's one thing to tell people to care for the poor and hungry. I think some of Jesus' other parables, like the parable of the good Samaritan, have gotten us thinking about the importance of loving and welcoming those on the margins. But this parable takes that concept to a whole other level. **This is Jesus saying that however you treat the poor, the hungry, the oppressed, and the marginal, is how you are treating me.** Do you want to love and worship God? Love the poor. I think Mother Teresa said it this way – “*You only love Jesus as much as you love the person you love the least.*” Whoever is the least of these in your life, be careful how you treat them, because that reveals a lot about your love for God.

And for those of you who have felt mistreated, be encouraged by how Jesus identifies with you. Whatever anyone has done to you, they do to Him. Think of how Jesus spoke to Saul, who became known as the apostle Paul:

Acts 9:3-5 - As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. ⁴ He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" ⁵ "Who are you, Lord?" Saul asked. "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting," he replied.

Jesus identifies with his people who are hurting and oppressed and marginalized. Listen again to what Jesus says that the king will say to the sheep:

Matthew 25:34-40 - "Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. ³⁵ For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, ³⁶ I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.' ³⁷ "Then the righteous will

answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink?' ³⁸ When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you?' ³⁹ When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?' ⁴⁰ "The King will reply, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.'"

Now, the most faithful way to read this passage is to interpret "brothers and sisters" as fellow believers. After all, this is how Jesus used the term throughout his life:

Matthew 12:48-50 - He replied to him, "Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?" ⁴⁹ Pointing to his disciples, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers. ⁵⁰ For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother."

Even though that is probably most accurate, I think this next passage sums up well what our attitude towards believers and unbelievers should be:

Galatians 6:9-10 - Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up. ¹⁰ Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers.

So one day we will stand before Jesus to be judged. And one aspect of how we will be judged will clearly be how we have treated the poor, the sick, the hungry, the prisoner, the forgotten and marginalized. The sheep love God simply by loving the least of these. And, of course, the opposite is true for the goats. Those who did not respond in love and compassion to the needy and marginalized are told by the King that they did not do it for Him. And he concludes by saying "Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life." Certainly a very strong consequence. I'd say that with consequences like that, we had better listen carefully to what Jesus is saying.

Let's consider the motivation behind this. Why are we to love the least of these?

1) We show compassion because He showed compassion towards us

I think Jesus is saying in this passage that whenever you find someone in need, how you respond to them is a good measure of how clearly you get the gospel. The more you understand the compassion that God has shown to you, that when

you were helpless, He gave His life for you, the more you will be filled with a Christlike compassion towards others.

Romans 5:6-8 - *You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. ⁷Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person someone might possibly dare to die. ⁸But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.*

When we were in need of compassion, Jesus came down and saved us.

2) We recognize the image of God in everyone

I think that the sheep also respond to the hurting and oppressed with compassion because they know that every human being is created in the image of God. The concept of the image of God comes from Genesis 1:26-27:

Genesis 1:26–27 - *Then God said, “Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.” ²⁷So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.*

Creation in the image of God means that we were created to represent and reflect God on earth. We represent Him in the way we steward His creation, and we are to reflect Him in that people should be able to look at us and see what God is like in His holiness, love, and justice. Clearly we have all fallen short of that creation ideal, but nevertheless, the call remains to be God’s image-bearers and to treat everyone with that level of love and dignity. As James put it:

James 3:9–10 - *With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse human beings, who have been made in God’s likeness. ¹⁰Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this should not be.*

Christians should never be known for mocking people who are not like them. We should be known for loving and treating everyone with dignity, as if they were Jesus Himself, for all were created in God’s image. This is where those who fought for equal rights grounded their argument. Consider MLK, in his sermon “The American Dream”:

You see, the founding fathers were really influenced by the Bible. The whole concept of the imago dei, as it is expressed in Latin, the 'image of God,' is the idea that all men have something within them that God injected. Not that they have substantial unity with God, but that every man has a capacity to have fellowship with God. And this gives him a uniqueness, it gives him worth, it gives him dignity. And we must never forget this as a nation: there are no gradations in the image of God. Every man from a treble white to a bass black is significant on God's keyboard, precisely because every man is made in the image of God. One day we will learn that. We will know one day that God made us to live together as brothers and to respect the dignity and worth of every man.

Whatever you do to the least of these, you do to me. **You only love God as much as you love the person you love the least.** Think of the person you have the hardest time loving. Now see them as Jesus. Think of groups of people – minorities, immigrants, gays, Catholics, rich people, poor people, stuck-up people, Pharisaic Christians, men, women, Republicans, Democrats – careful about your attitude towards them. You only love God as much as you love the person you love the least.

3) We know that loving our neighbor is true worship to God

Remember God's word in Amos:

Amos 5:21-24 – "I hate, I despise your religious festivals; your assemblies are a stench to me. ²² Even though you bring me burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them. Though you bring choice fellowship offerings, I will have no regard for them. ²³ Away with the noise of your songs! I will not listen to the music of your harps. ²⁴ But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream!"

True worship is not just singing songs. We need to worship and love God by loving the least of these. Sometimes we confuse worship with singing songs to God. It's more than that – it's justice, mercy, righteousness – that is worship to God. We as believers and the church should naturally be involved in ministries of mercy and justice, ministering to the poor, the hungry, the prisoner, the alien, for our Lord identifies with them. This is why as a church we have been involved with Hartford City Mission, with Street Church, with prison ministry, with ministry in nursing homes, and with our town social services.

Proverbs 19:17 - He who is kind to **the poor** lends to **the** LORD, and he will reward him for what he has done.

The good news should be good news for all who are in need of justice. Remember Jesus' opening words in Luke:

Luke 4:16-21 - He went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written: ¹⁸ **"The Spirit of the** Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to **the poor**. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for **the** prisoners and recovery of sight for **the** blind, to set **the** oppressed free, ¹⁹ to proclaim the **year of the Lord's favor**." ²⁰ Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him, ²¹ and he began by saying to them, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing."

Do not mistake that part of the good news of the gospel is good news for the oppressed, the poor, those in prison. It should be great news for the poor and marginalized when a church moves in, because care for the oppressed is part of Jesus' gospel. And yes, it will take discernment to know how to love. We don't just throw money at everyone in need. We can not meet every need individually, but we can act in love, and collectively as God's church, we can do a lot to show compassion to the hurting and oppressed.

So how are you living out your faith? Is your faith expressing itself in this sort of action? What is your attitude towards the least of these? How are you living out your faith when it comes to the least of these? May we be a church that demonstrates our love for God by loving the least of these.